

## James 3

- You may remember near the end of James 1, the apostle taught us an important principle for proper Christian living
  - First in v.21 he said we should put aside filthiness and wickedness
    - And receive the word of God, which is able to save our souls... save us in the sense of sanctifying us
      - Saving us from the consequences of our sinful choices
    - And that sanctifying process is a result of receiving the word in humility, hearing the teaching of God's word
  - James goes on to say that if we are merely hearers of the word and not doers of the word, we deceive ourselves into thinking we are religious
    - And then in v.26 James offers a gold standard of sorts for measuring who is truly putting the word into practice
    - If we cannot learn to bridle our tongue, to control it with authority, then our religion is worthless
      - Here again is this idea of worth or value
  - Any life of religion that doesn't arrive at sanctification – a life that is steadily becoming more Christ-like and holy – is of no value or worth
    - Outward religious practice that don't lead to an inward conforming to Christ in our lives won't profit God, our neighbors nor ourself
- Moving to Chapter 3 today, we come back to this theme
  - At the end of Chapter 2, James finished with a reminder that our life goal must be to declare our faith publicly by doing the works that faith requires
    - Works are anything that display our faith, whether an action or a word or even a thought
    - And for James, the words we use are a particularly good indicator of our maturity in the faith
  - So he spends Chapter 3 focused on speech and its relationship to spiritual maturity

[James 3:1](#) Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.

[James 3:2](#) For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.

- James' opening verses set the tone for the chapter
  - James begins with a warning
    - Let not many of you become teachers, because teachers incur a stricter judgment, and we all stumble in many ways.
  - The sense in Greek is "Do not press yourself into the role of teacher"
    - Don't presume to speak on behalf of the Lord concerning His word
    - Don't seek this role, because we are all prone to sinning and stumbling
      - And therefore don't place yourself in the position of possibly sinning with your speech while teaching
      - Because teachers will incur a stricter judgment
    - Failing to handle the word of God properly is a particularly damaging sin for a Christian
      - Teachers who sin through poor teaching stand to receive an even harsher judgment when they face Christ
      - They will be graded by tougher standards
- In v.2 James is going to quickly broaden the discussion beyond teachers, because he's really aiming for a general point on sinning with our speech
  - But before we go there with him, let's give a moment's thought to how we apply the statement in v.1
    - Is James trying to discourage us from teaching God's word?
      - In a way yes, but not so that we wouldn't have teachers, but so that we have teachers gifted and called by God
  - First, we need to remember that James is Jewish and he's writing to a Jewish audience

- And in Jewish culture, a teacher was an important authority figure
    - They called teachers rabbi, and it was a term of authority and power
  - So James is speaking about leaders in the church who express their leadership through a teaching role of one kind or another
    - And by teaching, we mean establishing the normative interpretation of Scripture for a body of believers
      - Today, we might call these people pastors, teaching pastors, Bible study leaders, etc.
      - And this would also include women who teach under the authority of pastors or elders and interpret Scripture
    - These are the roles that should particularly heed this warning
  - The warning says don't press yourself into one of these roles
    - Don't even make holding a leadership role in teaching a goal unless you are specifically gifted and called to that role
      - Teaching without the spiritual gift means working outside your gift, and it is not a work of the Spirit
      - And we are placing ourselves in jeopardy come judgment day
        - Because when we inevitably mishandle God's word in the course of teaching, we have deceived ourselves and others concerning God's word
        - Our mistake is magnified by being multiplied in the hearts and minds of our students
- What about the person who doesn't feel they have the gift to teach, but they feel led to conduct a Bible study group or lead a Sunday school class?
  - In light of James' teaching, we can safely conclude that someone absent a teaching gift could lead a Bible study or class
    - So long as that leader does not take it upon himself to interpret Scripture for the class

- Rather, the leader would present teaching from an approved curriculum or teacher who is clearly gifted to interpret God's word
  - That leader will still be accountable for what he says and does, as are all Christians
    - But the stricter judgment James mentions wouldn't be a concern, since the person isn't endeavoring to interpret Scripture
  - Finally, all Christians are given the ability by the Spirit to read and understand Scripture to a certain extent
    - I am not proposing that only certain people can read and interpret Scripture for us
      - This was the heresy perpetuated by Rome prior to the Reformation
    - We are a kingdom of priests, and all believers have equal access to the Spirit and to the opportunity to know and understand God's word
      - But there is a difference in God's economy between knowing something for oneself and endeavoring to teach Scripture to others
      - The Spirit may reveal some aspect of Scripture to us – just what He feels we need – while not giving us a complete enough picture to carry that message to others
- As I mentioned already, James quickly broadens his point beyond teachers
  - James is really talking about self-control
    - Because the most important work we can do in faith is the work of conforming our behavior to the commandments of Scripture
    - And James returns to his Chapter 1 theme telling us that the best test of our spiritual maturity is found in how well we control ourselves, particularly our tongue
  - If we can reach a point in our Christian walk where we are self-controlled in our speech, we will have become spiritually mature
    - That's what James means by "perfect" – the word is *teleios* which literally means having reached an end, or being complete

- This is a Biblical principle
- Our degree of spiritual maturity shows itself most readily in our speech patterns
  - If our speech is godly and pleasing to the Lord in all respects, we may fairly judge ourselves to be maturing in our walk of faith
- But this is a tough standard
  - It addresses lying, gossiping, boasting, slandering, cursing, and a whole host of other tendencies
  - And until we've put all those aside entirely, we still have work to do
- That's why James gives a warning to those who might wish to teach
  - Because if we're not a mature believer with a Spiritual gift to teach, we're likely to see our teaching become laced with one or another of these sins
    - And then comes a stricter judgment because our sin is infecting our students
- Now to the one who may doubt the relationship between the tongue and the rest of our spiritual maturity, James gives several analogies or examples to support his thesis
  - First, James establishes that a small thing can have great power

**James 3:3** Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well.

**James 3:4** Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.

**James 3:5** So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!

- Both examples are simple and illustrate James' point beautifully
  - First, a horse is a large animal but a trained rider can make it do anything merely by controlling the bit in his mouth
    - When you think about it, that's really quiet remarkable

- And the principle here is equally amazing
  - When we finally learn to yield to the Spirit's controlling influence in our speech, then we will have also yielded in other areas of our life and actions
- It's as if James is saying that the last thing we tend to give over to the Spirit is our speech
  - Perhaps because it's so closely connected to our thinking and motivations
    - As Jesus observed:

[Matt. 15:18](#) "But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man.

[Matt. 15:19](#) "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders.

- So if we are the horse, then the Holy Spirit is the rider
- And once we give Him control over our tongue, He will be free to direct our whole body into a Christ-like life
- And then the second example extends from the first
  - A ship faces many challenges and trials on the open water
    - But as long as the captain has control of the rudder – a very small part of that vessel – he can guide the ship safely through the strong winds
    - But there is an obvious corollary to this rule
      - If the captain doesn't control the rudder, those strong winds will eventually result in shipwreck
  - Obviously, we are the ship and the rudder is our tongue again
    - If our captain gains control of our tongue, he has the opportunity to guide us safely through difficult times
    - But if our rudder remains outside the Spirit's control, we face spiritual shipwreck
  - Paul alludes to an example of just such a situation in his first letter to Timothy

[1Tim. 1:18](#) This command I entrust to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you fight the good fight, [1Tim. 1:19](#) keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith.

[1Tim. 1:20](#) Among these are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan, so that they will be taught not to blaspheme.

- Hymenaeus and Alexander couldn't discipline their tongues and maintain a good conscience (meaning a good testimony)
  - So the Lord brought discipline through Paul, and their faith was shipwrecked, meaning their faith didn't profit them
- So in v.5 James summarizes
  - The tongue is a small part of the body, but it can boast or lay claim to great power in our lives
    - But unfortunately, not only does it have great saving power in our walk with Christ
    - But James turns to the negative and reminds us that it also has the power to condemn
  - He uses a third analogy to emphasize the negative side
    - A small flame can burn down a forest
  - And that leads James to his second point: as small as the tongue is, man is not capable of controlling it by himself

[James 3:6](#) And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell.

[James 3:7](#) For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race.

[James 3:8](#) But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.

- Our tongues represent the very world of sin, of hell itself
  - In the sense of the sin and evil that a tongue can ignite in ourselves and in others
    - And in v.6 James says that our sinful speech defiles the entire body

- And like a rudder, it can set our life on a course of evil
- Notice at the end of v.6 James says that a tongue can set our life on a course that is set on fire by hell
  - James is saying essentially the same thing Peter says in:

**1Pet. 5:8** Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

- The devil (or hell) can set our life on “fire” in the sense that he can set us on a course that brings our lives to a disastrous end
    - James isn’t suggesting a Christian who can’t tame their tongue will end up in hell
      - No amount of sinning can erase the grace of the New Covenant
  - But he is saying that we will see the Enemy taking advantage of our weakness and drive our Christian witness and testimony into oblivion
    - Leaving us with nothing at our judgment
- The problem of our tongue can’t be corrected by men’s own efforts
  - The answers aren’t found in self-help books
    - They are found in the God-help book, the Bible
      - Only God’s word with the Spirit can bring about spiritual maturity and the taming of our flesh, including of our tongue
    - And James makes clear that men don’t have the power to handle this alone
  - James mentions four categories of animals that have been tamed or subdued by man
    - These four categories are noteworthy because they match the four categories in Genesis 1
      - Beast, birds, creeping things and sea creatures
      - The third word is herpeton, from the word *herpo* in Greek which means to creep

- So James is intentionally referencing the four categories of the animal kingdom God created and gave to man to subdue
  - And just as God commanded Adam, man has indeed subdued these creatures
    - We have invented many ways to bring them under our control to a certain degree
    - There are limits of course
      - My family can't seem to control our poodle
- But the tongue is not something man can control in that way
  - We can't subdue it in any way comparable to the way we control animals
    - We may wish to control it, but sooner or later it re-exerts itself and we see our weakness
      - James says the tongue is unruly evil, meaning unrestrainable evil
  - James' point is that God gave us the power to subdue animals, but the power to restrain sin in our bodies comes only through the Spirit and God's word
    - We must recognize this is a problem we don't solve without Him guiding us
      - And the good works of faith begin with receiving God's word in humility (i.e., James 1:21)
      - And then being doers of the word by seeking to conform our lives to what we learn, yielding to the Spirit as He takes authority over our lives
- Finally, James challenges us to not be content with an untamed tongue

[James 3:9](#) With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God;

[James 3:10](#) from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.

[James 3:11](#) Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water?

[James 3:12](#) Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.

- As those who claim faith in Christ and desire to serve Him and witness about Him to others...
  - At one moment we bless His name with our tongues, and at another moment we curse men who are made in His image
    - Cursing doesn't just mean curse words, but any expression of hatred or condemnation made against someone
      - We're talking about all hateful or ungodly speech
  - It's back to the principle from James 2:10
    - If you violate one law, you violate them all
    - And though we bless the Lord in one moment, we are effectively cursing Him when we curse the men He made in His own image
  - You can't have it both ways, and yet we do it all the time
    - As James says in v.10, these things ought not be this way
- James uses a classic comparison that Jesus Himself makes in the Gospels
  - A fountain of water wouldn't be expected to produce both good and bad water
  - Or a plant can't produce fruit other than the kind intended
    - And as new creatures in Christ, we were born again by the Spirit so that we might bear fruit and glory to God
      - And when we allow our tongue to remain untamed, we are failing to live up to that eternal purpose
      - Our very reason for being saved is unmet in God's view so long as our tongue – and the rest of our body – remains outside the Spirit's control
    - We will one day bring forth fresh water, and then the next day we bring forth salt water
      - And in that way, we fail to bring our Lord glory
- Sometimes the oldest advice is the best, as our mothers said: if we can't say something nice, don't say something at all...like James said in 1:19

[James 1:19](#) This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger;